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'A masterpiece.' Durham by composer who died in police custody

By Lexi Solomon

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The Durham Symphony Orchestra, N.C. Central Kizazi Alumni Chorale and the Concert Singers of Cary rehearse Herman Whitfield III's Overture-Fanfare in G Major at the Durham Arts Council on Tuesday, Feb. 4, 2025. Whitfield's piece is part of Voices of the Unarmed: Justice, Love, Resilience, a free concert addressing police brutality against unarmed Black men. Travis Long tlong@newsobserver.com



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The Durham Symphony Orchestra will mark a historic first Friday evening when it performs the world premiere of a piece by a composer who died in police custody.

Herman Whitfield III's "Overture-Fanfare in G Major" will be featured in "Voices of the Unarmed: Justice, Love, Resilience," a [free concert](#) centered around police brutality against unarmed Black men.

The sold-out show is the brainchild of William Henry Curry, the orchestra's music director and the only Black man to serve in that role in a symphony in the South, and Jesse Rosen, a member of the orchestra's board of directors.

"In the symphony orchestra world, we have a reputation of being an elitist ivory tower kind of thing," Curry said in an interview. "I've tried to dismantle that entirely."

The genesis for the concert came when Rosen introduced Curry to "Seven Last Words," a piece by Atlanta-based composer Joel Thompson that features the last words of seven unarmed Black men who were killed by others.

That theme struck home for Curry, who had mentored Whitfield, a young Black composer who died at the hands of police in his Indiana home in April 2022. The duo met around 2003, when Curry selected one of Whitfield's pieces for the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, [The Indy Star reported](#).

"I got to know him and his parents and kept in touch over the next decade as his mentor," Curry recalled. "There was a harrowing day about 2 1/2 years ago where his mother got in touch with me, and she said that Herman had been having a panic attack at their home, and they called for an ambulance.

"Instead, several policemen came, and Herman was naked, having a panic attack," he continued. "He was unarmed, obviously no concealed weapons, and he died while the police were there."



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Whitfield died after being tased twice by police, according to The Indy Star. He was 39. The officers were **found not guilty** of multiple charges, including involuntary manslaughter and reckless homicide, by a jury in December, local TV station Fox 59 reported.

With Whitfield's death fresh in his mind and Black History Month approaching, the time seemed right to perform Thompson's piece, and a clear theme emerged, Curry said. Rather than celebrating romantic love, the Valentine's Day concert will focus on the love found in community, justice and strength.

“The program took a different direction, but it’s still related to Valentine’s Day,” Curry said.

What’s being performed

The concert’s program is as follows:

- “The Star-Spangled Banner” by Francis Scott Key and Arturo Toscanini
- “Fanfare for the Common Man” by Aaron Copland
- “Overture-Fanfare in G Major” by Herman Whitfield III
- “Seven Last Words of the Unarmed” by Joel Thompson
- “The Moldau” by Bedrich Smetana
- “Eulogy for a Dream,” a 17-minute piece by Curry featuring the words of Martin Luther King Jr.

Before the concert, on Thursday and Friday, Thompson and Curry will meet with Durham students and teachers to discuss the importance of music in the community. A panel discussion will also be held immediately after the concert featuring Thompson, Curry, community leaders, Whitfield’s parents and members of law enforcement.

Including Whitfield’s piece means a lot to Curry, who had asked the late composer’s mother, Gladys Whitfield, to search her son’s room for any works that hadn’t been publicly performed, he said. It took a year, but the search was successful.

“She did go through her son’s study and found a complete orchestral piece, the orchestral score and all 34 parts,” Curry said. “It had been commissioned by a Detroit youth symphony, but they sent it back to him saying, rightly so, it was way too difficult for a youth orchestra to play. So there it lay for the next 20 years or so.”

Rehearsing Whitfield’s work for the first time was emotional, Curry recalled.

“I was, of course, in tears,” he said. “Number one, it’s a masterpiece. Number two, it’s a wonderfully poignant work, haunting.”

Thompson, who will attend Friday’s concert, is looking forward to hearing Whitfield’s work.

“You always think, as a Black composer, ‘Yeah, this could be me, this could potentially happen to me,’ and then here is his experience that stands as a testament to that thought,” he said.

Rosen and Curry’s efforts to encourage community discussion are especially exciting, he added.

“It gives me hope that this craft to which I’ve dedicated my life, putting dots on a page, is not completely futile when it comes to making [a] community and society a better place,” Thompson said.

As for the Whitfields, whose transportation and accommodations will be paid for by the orchestra, hearing one of their son’s works performed for the first time will be a bittersweet experience.

“I think he would be so happy if he could be here to experience it, but he’s not,” Gladys Whitfield said. “So hopefully ... when we’re attending the concert, we can think of him and try to think of how he would feel and try to visualize him being there and give us a moment of happiness.”

Free tickets to the “Voices of the Unarmed: Love, Justice, Resilience” concert were sold out as of Monday afternoon. The concert will be held 8 p.m. Friday at the Carolina Theatre, 309 W. Morgan St., Durham.

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Lexi Solomon

The News & Observer



Lexi Solomon joined The News & Observer in August 2024 as the emerging news reporter. She previously worked in Fayetteville at The Fayetteville Observer and CityView, reporting on crime, education and local government. She is a 2022 graduate of Virginia Tech with degrees in Russian and National Security & Foreign Affairs.

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